
FROM DAKAR TO AMSTERDAM, AND AN ONGOING PRACTICE IN BURKINA FASO

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Solidar Switzerland took part in the experience capitalization training workshops that took place in Dakar in October 2017 and February 2018, and in Amsterdam in 2019. This helped us start incorporating the capitalization approach to review our project intervention methods and monitoring strategies for improved results. After the workshops, a “champion” was identified to advocate for the institutionalization of the capitalization approach, and after several months of hard work, the process is showing results. Several developments within the organisation – from the collective training of colleagues to individual interventions and support of the process by the company leaders – have been beneficial.

Solidar Switzerland is an international NGO that has worked in Burkina Faso for more than 40 years. The aim of the organisation is to contribute to the fight against poverty and improve the living conditions of the beneficiaries of its development projects. The main intervention areas include governance, education, food security and the fight against child labour.



The fight against poverty is a long-term process that requires innovative, sustainable strategies inspired by the results seen in the field. This is why Solidar Switzerland attaches great importance to the capitalization of experiences because this makes it possible to improve the implementation of its projects for greater impact. Participation in the CTA experience capitalization training was a great opportunity seized by the organisation, and the representative who took part in the various workshops has since followed the action plans that were developed then, and the recommendations that were made. Different experience capitalization processes have started and been completed. So how successful have we been? And what lessons can we share?

Towards institutionalization

Going home after the second CTA workshop in Dakar in February 2018, I updated the Country Representative on what the training had entailed and on the process of experience capitalization. During this meeting, the director asked if we could organise an internal workshop with other colleagues and share what we had learned, and convey the importance of the process, and the stages involved. Because of the differing schedules and time constraints of all the staff members that we wanted to join the workshop, it was actually held in March.

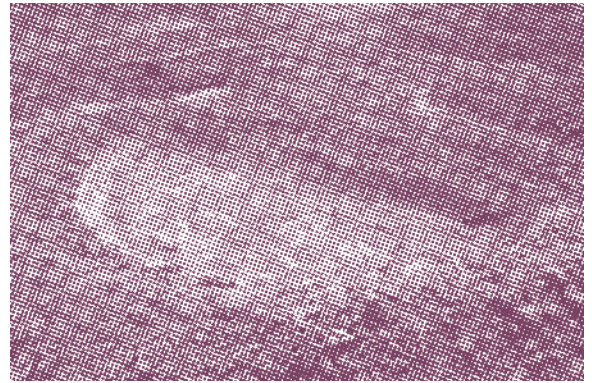
Cover The reasons for success included the steps taken to share information with all colleagues

Right The half-moon technique promoted by Solidar Switzerland shows clear results in the field: more water and higher yields

During the first CTA training workshop in 2017, I worked to complete an article that looked at the use of the half-moon technique (an agricultural practice that involves digging a half-moon-shaped hole in which crops are grown with manure to increase productivity), as a specific experience I was involved in. I shared this with my colleagues, describing the process I followed and the general steps of the methodology. Thus, the meeting held in March was an opportunity to present my case, and introduce the e-learning module – developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and explained during the CTA training – on how to complete an experience capitalization process through various different steps. There were eight people at the workshop, including six project managers, the country representative and the deputy coordinator.

During the third week of May 2018 we had three further days of training with the eight staff members who had come to the first workshop. The training focused on the capitalization process and made use of the FAO training module. During this session, we conducted an inventory of good practices that could be capitalised on. In July 2018, another 3-day workshop was organised with the partners of Solidar Switzerland.

Thanks to these training sessions and to the internal advocacy steps, the budget allocated to capitalization within the organisation was increased for the year 2019. This was possible because the headquarters had authorised a re-reading of the budget that had already been drawn up. This exercise also allowed the implementing partners to increase their budget for capitalization activities, taking into account possible resource persons they would need to institutionalise the process.



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These different actions can be considered as successes. However, it should be noted that these successes were not obtained without difficulties. One such difficulty encountered in the process was the unavailability of actors for the planned meetings. This somewhat delayed the activities that had been planned. Another difficulty – and one of the most important ones – was the different way in which we all saw the key elements of the approach when implementing it. Under the experience capitalization approach, you focus on one experience at a time in order to learn from each individual intervention, and do not necessarily consider the project as a whole. This was a difficult concept to grasp for some.

Analysis

After training colleagues on the experience capitalization approach, the challenge was to integrate the process with our regular monitoring practices. This task was somewhat met through the systematic integration of lessons learned within project databases. Taking into account factors of intervention success or failure also led us to integrate progress markers or indicators, such as the reach of all project interventions, into the logical frameworks of the projects. Such markers have also been added to the monitoring plans.

We are also changing the way we track activities in the field. In terms of data collection, for instance, we pay more attention to the beneficiaries and to the ways in which we interact with them. This is helping us improve the quality of the information we obtain. During the CTA training, we discussed the best way to hold interviews in the field in order to collect qualitative information, e.g. by making all interviewees feel important and understood. Following this, the interviews with the project stakeholders are much better now. Instead of the interviews being limited to implementing partners and beneficiaries, we also started to include other actors, such as civil servants working with the state agencies which play a role in our projects. These actors have also since been invited to our project assessment meetings. We are only at the beginning, but we expect to raise awareness on the importance of experience capitalization among these stakeholders, and explain to them how it can help improve the dissemination of information to engage their support.

Another important fact is the involvement of consultants outside the project, all of whom are experts on a specific intervention area and can follow up on the outcomes. Their presence can be very useful. Indeed, as an implementing actor, we do not see some mistakes that we make. An outside eye sometimes reveals other aspects of reality.

In order to fully institutionalise the experience capitalization approach, beyond the conviction of organisation managers, it is essential to get employees to “buy” the process individually. It is not only the senior management who will be involved in any future process, and staff at all levels must be involved. Often, it is those at the field level who are best placed to suggest a specific experience to describe and analyse as they see first-hand the impacts of the projects to local communities.

As the experience capitalization “champion”, I did not have any particular problems with my line managers in implementing the approach and am in the process of involving more of my colleagues. The leaders of an organisation can decide that this becomes a regular activity, but if they do not adhere to it, and continuously encourage and support all colleagues, then this will not take place.

*Below The “champion”
in action*



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Successes

One of main factors that contributed to the success we have seen was the willingness of our managers themselves to engage in the approach – both in Burkina Faso and at the headquarters in Switzerland. I was responsible for developing these ideas within the organisation, but they were already aware of what the approach could do for Solidar Switzerland, and I discovered that the process was a part of their vision.

The second reason for success included the steps we took for sharing information with my colleagues. It is useless to try to have the monopoly of an approach. The more people involved, the better, and the greater the successes. When the link to the FAO online course was shared with our program officer for Burkina Faso in Switzerland, she sent it on to more colleagues, and today, the team in the Mozambique branch are also engaged in the process.

The third reason is the engagement of all project managers in the capitalization dynamics. As already mentioned above, it is the individual colleagues who, at their own level, will put the experience capitalization approach into practice. If they are not convinced, it would be difficult to see this approach being adopted, even if the leaders of the organisation are in favour. To summarise, we can say that the main cause of success is adherence to – and accompaniment of the process – by all colleagues.

Conclusions

It is important to remain focused and to regularly start new processes. Experience capitalization is not a one-time intervention but a continuous process. We must continue to encourage and advocate, and that is what we have committed to. One of the ways to ensure the continuation of the process is by including experience capitalization activities/knowledge within the staff job descriptions and specifications. Staff engagement with and contributions to the approach can then become part of the annual review processes. The roles and responsibilities of the staff involved in every process will also need to be clarified so that this practice becomes and remains a reality within the organisation.



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